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Jan Sznajd (1930–1990)

Professor Jan Sznajd was a most interesting figure who stood out from amongst the professors at the Faculty of Medicine of the Cracow Academy of Medicine – a remarkable feat given the fact there were many eminent individuals. It was easy to spot his lean frame and face with its characteristic features, ones as if etched in stone. He was a fairly tall, dark-haired man with thick hair which was greying slightly, a penetrating gaze through prominent dark eyes and a characteristically large nose. He had an interesting face, one that drew attention more as a result of the strength of character it portrayed, by its expression of concentration than by its regularity of features.

He stood out in his day through his unusual eye for elegant appearance. He always was immaculately turned out, dressed in a beautifully tailored dark or grey suit accentuating his lean physique, a well-chosen tie and perfectly ironed poplin shirts. This should scarcely be a surprise since Prof. Sznajd's wife was Margit, the known Cracow actress connected with the Old Theatre, while the professor's clothes were made to measure by the theatre tailor, Mr. Józef Kania.

As a student of the Faculty of Medicine of the then Academy of Medicine in Cracow (today the Jagiellonian University's Collegium Medicum) I attended the professor's lectures. The fundamentals of laboratory diagnostics, the subject he taught, was not a subject which we, the students of the final years, were

the most keen to learn. That said, there was always a good attendance at his lectures, for they preceded themselves with the rumour that the lecturer was demanding and that his subject was consequently difficult to pass. We did not realise then what an important role was played by laboratory research in diagnostics and how it helped in the investigation of progress in treatment, in the controlling of a patient's health while under treatment. The professor did not appear to us as terrible as common opinion had it. Almost everyone passed.

We had no idea at the time that he was a visionary, the creator of the first modern academic unit involved in laboratory diagnostics and clinical chemistry. He foresaw the future development of analytical research on a grand scale for the needs of medical diagnostics; he worked on the automation of the analytical process and the introduction of control tests as a routine procedure in diagnostic laboratories. He combined clinical thinking with an analytical approach in his work. He was a first-rate organiser, a man gifted with immense intelligence and clarity of thought. Thanks to his doggedness he was able to see through various undertakings despite an array of obstacles. He was an all-rounder, an excellent academic, doctor, organiser and teacher. It is difficult to visualise the immensity of the work he completed during his life, one so prematurely terminated.

Jan Sznajd was born on the 21st of June 1930 in Cracow and was an only child. His parents – Paulina and Arnold – belonged to the intelligentsia with his father working as a well-known barrister. Little Janek went to primary school in Cracow but his education was interrupted by the outbreak of World War II. In 1939, together with his parents, he left Cracow and escaped to Lvov, where for a short time the family found shelter. When the members of the Lvov bar were transported to Siberia, the Sznajd family were amongst them. In Siberia the future professor was to attend a Soviet school and received a school-leaving certificate in Russia, hence his fluent knowledge of the language. There in Krasnoyarskii krai, on the Yenisei River, the young J. Sznajd worked hard, panning tons of sand in the search for gold. While working his hands froze, and he was to carry the traces of frostbite with him all his life. His recollections of this period are of a constant sense of hunger, which accompanied the deported Poles as equally as it did the indigenous inhabitants of Siberia. The fear of hunger, the recollection of constant danger, the nightmarish images of the past were to permanently mark the psyche of this sensitive child. Many years later Prof. Sznajd commented on his life spent in Siberia saying that despite the fear and the shortages, being in Siberia saved his life for if he had remained in Poland he would have had no chance of survival.

After the end of World War II the Sznajd family returned to Cracow in 1945, and J. Sznajd to school. He finished the well-known 7th August Wit-

kowski Grammar School (at present the 5th Grammar School), and in 1948 he started his degree at the Jagiellonian University's Faculty of Medicine. He gained his degree in medicine in 1953 as a graduate of the Medical Academy, for political reasons of the time the medical faculties were separated from the Jagiellonian University itself. They were to be reincorporated only in 1994.

While still a student J. Sznajd took work at the Department of Physiological Chemistry, headed by Prof. Bolesław Skarżyński. In 1958 Doctor J. Sznajd became a senior assistant at the 3rd Internal Disease Clinic run at the time by Prof. Julian Aleksandrowicz. At the 3rd Clinic he organised a biochemical laboratory which bore the name The Clinical Enzymology Laboratory, which carried out research into the diagnosis of leukaemia and the pathogenesis of myeloid leukaemia. In 1967 he was awarded his Ph.D. in Medicine, while in 1970 he obtained his post-doctoral degree of *habilitacja* on the basis of his research into ribonuclease in granulocytes. He became an assistant professor in 1971 and professor and full professor in 1977 and 1988 respectively.

Jan Sznajd, in working during his degree at the Department of Physiological Chemistry, researched the possibility of using the electrophoretic separation of lipoprotein serums for diagnostic purposes. This research was to constitute the basis for his doctoral thesis. His work at the Department of Physiological Chemistry left him convinced that professional, modern biochemical tests were an essential part of the diagnostic and therapeutic process, while their combination with clinical issues was the key to the development of modern medicine.

In the 1960s, Prof. Sznajd's research during his work at the 3rd Internal Diseases Clinic concentrated around the problem area of changes in the activity of nucleotidases enzymes in the blood serum and urine of leukaemia patients. The crowning of his scientific activities in this field was the awarding of a 1st Class Prize by the minister of health for his work on the enzymes of leucocytes. The laboratory, which he became head of, was to develop rapidly, becoming the Central Laboratory of Clinical Biochemistry in 1962.

After 1970 the professor's scientific interests were concentrated around the question of the pathogenesis of atheromatosis, its risk factors and their consequences. These matters were to become the focus of his studies for the next 20 years. Together with his colleagues he conducted prospective tests covering a population of several thousand in the Tarnobrzeg Province of Poland, with the tests involving an assessment of the risk of circulatory diseases including in particular disturbances to the lipid metabolism. He conducted as well as initiating many international research projects connected with epidemiology and the prevention of circulatory diseases, including the EURO 8202 programme (WHO European Collaborative trial of multifactorial prevention of coronary disease), the INTERSALT Study – research into the con-

nection between the consumption of sodium and potassium and high blood pressure, the Pol-MONICA and WHO MONICA Project (Multinational Monitoring of Cardiovascular Disease) – a project for the prevention of coronary disease. In recognition of his work on the epidemiology of circulatory diseases, the professor received the Scientific Council Prize at the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare as well as an award from the Polish Cardiology Society. He was the author of over 200 scientific publications and over 150 congressional papers. In addition he was the co-author of the monograph *Choroba białaczkowa* i *choroby krwi układu krwiotwórczego* (ed. Prof. J. Aleksandrowicz) [Leukaemia and blood diseases of the hemopoietic system] as well as the first Polish textbook on clinical biochemistry under the editorship of Prof. Stefan Angielski. The best known work associated with Prof. Sznajd is the extensive work (over 1000 pages) *Biochemia kliniczna w praktyce lekarskiej* [Clinical biochemistry in medical practice]. The professor not only initiated the writing of this handbook but also edited and wrote a significant number of its chapters.

In 1970 the then Dr. Sznajd M.D. was entrusted with organising the laboratory facilities at the newly created Institute of Internal Medicine. This institute was composed of 10 clinics, each of which had its own laboratory, working with different methods and equipment. Professor Sznajd was instrumental in integrating these units and standardising their activities, something that was a huge organisational undertaking. There came into being the Department of Clinical Chemistry, which incorporated the hitherto separate laboratories and their personnel. Professor Sznajd divided the Department into two parts: the scientific and the diagnostic service. He constantly modernised the workings of the laboratories: for example in 1974 he introduced the first automatic biochemical analyzer.

In 1973 the professor was also given charge of a 36-bed ward, operating within the framework of the Institute of Internal Medicine. In 1979 this unit became, as the Clinic of Microbiological Diseases, a part of the Department of Biochemical Diagnostics deriving itself from the Department of Clinical Chemistry. Profesor Sznajd was to head this department until his death in 1990.

The professor was a most excellent organiser, an example of which were his activities in the Polish Society of Laboratory Diagnostics (PTDL). He ran post-graduate training in laboratory diagnostics and clinical analysis, and from 1973 onwards regularly organised symposia on the subject in Cracow. In 1983 he was made head of the Main Board of PTDL, being again elected to the post in 1986, while exceptionally he was chosen for a third time in 1989. Prof. Sznajd active involvement in PTDL resulted in him being entrusted with the organisation of the 11th International Congress in Clinical Chemistry. Unfortunately the professor was not to see the congress itself as this took

place in 1991, after his death. The congress assembled 1,200 participants and was both a scientific and organisational success.

To commemorate Prof. Sznajd's contributions as a pioneer of Polish laboratory diagnostics, the Foundation for the Development of Laboratory Diagnostics and the company Roche Diagnostic funded on the tenth anniversary of his death a prize in his name for outstanding scientific and organisational achievements in the field of laboratory diagnostics.

Professor J. Sznajd also fulfilled other functions: he was a member of the national Specialist Unit for Laboratory Diagnosis, as well as a provincial and regional specialist in this field; he was the head of the Research Unit for Health Care in Przemyśl, and in 1983 was chosen in recognition of his services to be a member of the Committee of Clinical Pathophysiology at the Polish Academy of Sciences. He also held the function of vice-rector of the Medical Academy in Cracow, he was the rector's representative for postgraduate training, he also jointly created the Polish High Blood Pressure Society. He was editor-in-chief of the Polish medical journal *Przegląd Lekarski* [The Medical Review]. This journal was modernised under his leadership: articles from guest authors were included, the graphic layout was changed, the number of reviewers and the size of the print was increased.

Professor J. Sznajd was the creator of the teaching programme in clinical chemistry and the fundamentals of laboratory diagnostics for students of the Faculty of Medicine. He introduced postgraduate training courses at the Cracow medical academy and from 1971 to 1981 he held the position of the rector's representative for this type of training. An innovative undertaking of his was the organisation of postgraduate training courses in the form of student science-research camps. He also introduced an annual symposium in laboratory diagnostics and clinical analysis. He organised regular meetings and training sessions in his department; while under his guidance 17 Ph.D.s and 2 postdoctoral degrees of *habilitacja* were successfully defended; in his clinic 64 individuals became specialists in internal diseases or diagnostics.

Professor J. Sznajd was a known perfectionist and he checked every piece of information placed in his works thoroughly. Hypotheses and research problems were discussed many times with colleagues, he would ask for opinions and probe matters until he had formulated a clear position on the problem in hand. He would drive his Ph.D. students to despair for Ph.D. theses he would read extremely carefully and would diligently correct, while a Ph.D. student on receiving back their manuscript with amendments would have to be extremely patient for an appropriate text required numerous additions and modifications before it reached the stage at which the professor would consider it appropriate. Those who wrote their Ph.D. under his guidance invariably passed with merit.

He wrote his own pieces by hand, in pencil. At the beginning his wife would type them up, although later this was done by a secretary. He would correct his manuscripts many times and one needs to remember that this was the era before computers, whereby whole pages had to be rewritten. He was most exact, always trying to express his thoughts clearly and precisely, taking care to use good Polish and an acceptable style in his writing.

The perfection in the professor's written texts is well illustrated by the following account: under his editorship and at his initiative an extensive handbook was written for doctors on the use of biochemical research in medical treatment: *Biochemia kliniczna w praktyce lekarskiej* [Clinical Biochemistry in Medical Practice], to which the introduction, written by Prof. Sznajd, was considered by the editor from the State Medical Publishers to be too long and she recommended that it be shortened. Professor Sznajd was friendly with Henryk Vogler, a known writer and literary critic, whom he asked to evaluate the text. Vogler looked through the text and after a week returned it without having changed a single word. Professor Sznajd sent the text to the editing board with the information that it was not possible to reduce the amount of the text without violating its logical whole, and that if the editor herself would like to introduce alterations then she could take on the necessary shortening. The editor, after a few days, returned the text – untouched – in which she had altered nothing, not even a comma.

But writing did not always come easily, with creative inspiration not always appearing on command. Sometimes the professor would pace the room searching for the right words, for the right mood to write. At such moments he would turn to his wife with a proposition: 'Perhaps we'll bake something?' In a relaxed atmosphere, preparing some culinary creation, he would relax, and stop worrying about the lack of inspiration. After such a form of relaxation it was easier for him to write an academic piece.

Professor Sznajd enjoyed good food; he was a gourmet who had his favourite bread which he used to buy at the Kleparz Market in Cracow, and he used to say that good bread was baking at its finest, much tastier than any sophisticated confectionary. And even more interestingly he was able to rustle up some very tasty dishes himself. He was known for his salads (for example rice salad) and cakes. His culinary *pièce de résistance* was his famous cheesecake, to which he added half a glass of cream instead of butter (so that it was less fatty). For the professor paid great attention to healthy food and propagated a low-calorie, balanced diet with a lot of fruit and vegetables. He closely cooperated with Prof. Witold Szostak of the Institute of Food and Nutrition in Warsaw and was convinced that a healthy lifestyle and a correct diet played a fundamental role in counteracting circulatory diseases.

The years spent in Siberia in exceptionally difficult conditions, often hungry, left him with a deep respect for bread and food. He hated waste, and it was alien to him to throw food away. Through his difficult recollections of those dramatic years, when a slice of bread was unobtainable, and a handful of flour scrapped from the rolling out board constituted the dream of a hungry child, he belonged to those whom Norwid spoke about in his poem that 'a crumb of bread they raise from the ground through respect for the gifts of heaven.'

Despite his work commitments he tried to look after his health and physical condition. With his characteristic self-discipline he maintained a very regular type of life. He would get up every day at 5 a.m. and do exercises for one and a half an hours listening to music, often popular entertainment pieces. Normally he would spend the whole of the day at work in the clinic, and there he had an array of duties: looking after the sick, teaching and organisational work, along with the writing of academic pieces. His day would finish late in the evening yet he made sure he received a decent night's sleep – at 10 p.m. he tried to be asleep.

After academic work he would relax by practising sport. He also enjoyed cooking as a way of unwinding. In free moments he enjoyed reading detective stories, which amused him as he tried to solve the mystery before the end of the book.

He liked driving and was known to be an excellent driver. Sobiesław Zasada, the famous Cracow rally driver is supposed to have once said that from amongst the professors of the Cracow Medical Academy the best drivers were Prof. J. Sznajd and Prof. Jerzy Jedliński (the head of the Department of Neurology).

He was a perfectionist not only academically but in every field he was involved in: as a teacher, organiser, head of the clinic. During one of the visits to the ward he opened the door to the patients' bathroom and toilet. He was not impressed with what he saw – the toilets and hand basins were not of the standard of cleanliness he expected. The orderlies standing to attention explained that they had cleaned the premises and that nothing more could be done to improve the appearance. 'What do you mean nothing can be done?' he retorted, clearly upset – 'a brush, a bucket and some rags, please!' He grabbed the brush and cleaned the lavatories until 'they gleamed' in order to show what a clean bathroom should look like. From then onwards the wards, corridors, and all other rooms in his clinic could serve as models of cleanliness and order, while his pedantry became proverbial.

A great idea and a great organisational undertaking were the professor's student study camps. The then famous camps were organised in Mielec, Baranów, Tarnobrzeg and Stalowa Wola for a number of years and several

thousand students attended. Amongst the participants were several current professors of the Jagiellonian University's Collegium Medicum, for whom they constituted the beginning of their academic path. I attended camps in Stalowa Wola and remember that they were brilliantly organised. We stayed in boarding house type accommodation or in dorms and carried out tests on the workers of the local industries. It was not a difficult task: taking blood pressures and blood samples for analysis, noting down information for the questionnaires. We were not overworked, and we treated these activities as something distinguishing for us as students as we were carrying out 'real' academic research. One of the great attractions of the camps were the parties and events organised during their duration: bonfires, trips, various gatherings. It became a tradition during these bonfires to spit-roast a sheep, which sometimes was over cooked or not roasted enough, while the taste of mutton was not for everyone. But then it wasn't about 'eating mutton' but rather 'spit-roasting' mutton over a fire – and this was the allure. Add to this a barrel of beer – funded by the professor himself – and that atmosphere: the night, the fire, the sparks flying skywards, the sheep rotating on the spit, the foaming mugs of beer, the songs sung to the guitar. And it is from such moments, ones when everyone unwound completely, that I remember Prof. Sznajd, smiling, relaxed without his characteristically lined forehead.

In his final years Prof. Jan Sznajd struggled with an incurable disease, yet still he did not limit his professional activities and this was the period of his greatest academic achievements. He died on the 12th of October 1990.

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